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Coups and Killings in Kabul

A KGB defector tells how Afghanistan became Brezhnev's Viet Nam



Vladimir Kuzichkin, 35, a former KGB major whose presence in Britain was announced by the British government last month, has given an extraordinary account of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan—perhaps the greatest blot on Brezhnev's career—as seen by the KGB. Kuzichkin, who defected to the British last June, had served under cover in Iran for five years. He was in the ultrasecret "Directorate S," which controls "illegals," Soviet-born agents abroad. In an exclusive interview in London last week with TIME's Frank Melville, Kuzichkin said: 1) Brezhnev himself overruled repeated advice from Yuri Andropov's KGB not to turn Afghanistan into a Soviet satellite, 2) Afghan President Babrak Karmal is a KGB agent of long standing, 3) Karmal's predecessor was murdered in his palace by a specially trained, KGB-led Soviet assault group. Kuzichkin's account:

Senior KGB officers rarely let their hair down about politics. But Afghanistan has exasperated many. As a former boss [a KGB general] put it late one night: "Afghanistan is our Viet Nam. Look at what has happened. We began by simply backing a friendly regime: slowly we got more deeply involved; then we started manipulating the regime—sometimes using desperate measures—and now? Now we are bogged down in a war we cannot win and cannot abandon. It's ridiculous. A mess. And but for Brezhnev and company we would never have got into it in the first place." The general had said what many of us involved with Afghanistan—in the KGB, the army and outside—felt but would not stick our necks out to say.

It all began innocently enough with a lucky accident. Over the past 50 years we had never had any serious problems with the Afghan kings. Then, in 1973, [Mohammed] Daoud overthrew the monarchy with the help of the leftists. Although the leftist officers had been trained in the Soviet Union, we had not encouraged them to overthrow the King. Nonetheless, the reaction in the Soviet leadership was that this change was for the good.

Our relations with Daoud were never very good. He was keen to keep open his links with the West. He did not wish to become too closely involved with us. Those of us who knew Afghanistan were convinced no harm would come of that. The Afghans would slaughter each other for generations, regardless of whether they claimed to be Communists.

It was inconceivable to us that Afghanistan could do any credit to the Soviet Union, let alone "Communism." The Afghans, we told each other, should be left to stew in their own juice. We could never control them, but neither could anyone else. We had our first taste of things to come in 1978. Daoud turned against the Communists who had helped him to power.



Brezhnev welcoming Babrak Karmal to Moscow in 1980

coup—in fact, from their prison cells.

The coup succeeded, and Afghanistan went Communist. But Mr. Brezhnev and his colleagues brushed aside the vitally important warnings that the KGB was giving them—and disaster ensued. At the outset the Politburo felt it now had a chance to make some real headway in Afghanistan. It would pour in money and advisers. Afghanistan's links with the West would be gradually severed. Afghanistan would be not only a neighboring country with whom we had good relations, like Finland, but a new member of the "Communist family."

The KGB tried to explain tactfully that a Communist takeover in Afghani-

Daoud as a legitimate ruler. An openly Communist regime would arouse hostility that would then be directed against the Soviet Union.

It was clearly of the utmost importance that Afghanistan should have the right leader. The choice was between Karmal, who headed the Parcham faction in the Afghan Communist party, and [Noor Mohammed] Taraki, who headed the Khalq faction. We knew a lot about both men. In the papers we put to the Politburo, we scrupulously assessed their strengths and weaknesses. Our assessment made it clear that Taraki would be a disastrous choice. He was savage by temperament, had little feel for handling complex political issues, and would be easily influenced by his cronies, but not by us. Karmal, on the other hand, we said, understood the need for subtle policies. Moreover, he had been a KGB agent for many years. He could be relied upon to accept our advice.

The Politburo decided to back Taraki because Mr. Brezhnev said he knew Taraki personally. He was sure Taraki would do a good job! Things started going off the rails almost at once. Taraki shipped Karmal off to Prague as ambassador. He then set about killing Karmal's supporters (many of whom were our own informers). Brezhnev would do nothing to stop this slaughter—and Karmal, who was already disgruntled, began to bear a bitter grudge against the Soviet Union. Things soon went from bad to worse. The Shah had fallen in Iran. Taraki's policies seemed certain to ensure there would also be a massive Muslim insurrection in Afghanistan. Taraki's response was to

slaughter any opposition within his reach. Moscow tried to persuade him that this was a recipe for disaster, he should not repeat Stalin's errors. Taraki told Moscow to mind its own business.

One day things began to look brighter. A man called [Hafizullah] Amin seemingly emerged from nowhere to be Taraki's deputy. He was a cultivated Oriental charmer. Quietly, Amin began to take control away from Taraki. More important, he persuaded Moscow that he would be able to defuse the Muslim threat. We at the KGB, though, had doubts about Amin from the start. Our investigations showed him to be a smooth-talking fascist who was secretly pro-Western (he had been educated in the United States) and we